

## **Measuring reading comprehension in an L2 speed reading course: Response to Mclean**

Anna C-S Chang  
Hsing-Wu University  
Taiwan

This article is in response to McLean's critique of my "Improving reading rate activities for EFL students: Timed reading and repeated oral reading" (2012). I was very pleased with McLean's interest in this under researched and as yet little understood area. Reading fluency has been well documented in L1 reading research; however, it has received little attention in the field of foreign or second language learning. Despite this, L2 researchers and teachers recognize its importance and there is much room for further research. For this reason, I believe it is important to respond to McLean's comments.

First, McLean's remarks regarding insufficient vocabulary knowledge is the cause of poor comprehension of the passages in the timed reading (TR) tests. Throughout the paper, I did not claim that the students in the TR group demonstrated satisfactory comprehension levels (see p. 77). When a reader's comprehension of a passage does not reach the suggested level—70%, we can assume that the reader's comprehension is low in terms of the percentage recommended. It is just a matter of degree—whether students comprehend 30%, 50%, 70%, or 100% of the reading passages.

McLean attributed the unsatisfactory comprehension level to students' not mastering the second 1000 words based on their VLT (Vocabulary Levels Test) scores because the passages were written at the most frequent 2000 word level. However, in another study I co-authored (Chang & Millett, 2013) the VLT scores did not seem to be the main factor for the low comprehension level. One of the passages (*The Girl with Green Eyes*) was taken from *One-way Ticket* (Bassett, 2000), written in 400 headwords, and the other two were taken from *Reading for Speed and Fluency* (Nation & Malarcher, 2007), Book 1, which was written in 500 headwords. Students' comprehension levels for the unfamiliar text was slightly below 70% despite these texts being written within the students' vocabulary knowledge. Apart from my own work, previous studies on speed reading, regardless of whether researchers reported their students' vocabulary knowledge or did reading text analysis before the intervention, unanimously showed that comprehension levels were far less satisfactory when timing was involved.

Second, McLean quoted from the introduction in Millett's (2005) speed reading books stating that these passages should only be used on the condition that the reader is familiar with the first 2000 words. Relying on one guideline to determine whether a passage is suitable for a student is not sufficient. To take a passage, for example, from *New Zealand Speed Readings for ESL*

*Learners* written at the 2000 word level: If analysed by Professor Nation's *Range* Program, *Sir Edmund Hillary* contains 11 word families on the 2000 word level, which are *climb, crash, foot, explore, guide, hospital, hunt, origin, plane, sad, and title*. Six out of the eleven words were among the 1200 essential English words in the participants' junior high school English word list and five in the senior high school list. This does not mean that the students had acquired all those words in their study list, and my point here is simply to suggest that while it is useful to have guidelines when we choose materials for study or teaching, the researcher or teacher must also use their own judgment. There are many factors that affect reading rates and reading comprehension to some degree, (e.g., text types, background knowledge, or syntactic complexity). In L2 teaching, if the teachers come from the same learning background as their students, it could be easier for them to determine whether the materials suit their students' levels. The purpose of administering the VLT in this study was to choose appropriate book levels for students to practice reading passages in class. However, the VLT is simply a diagnostic test for *estimating* L2 learners' English vocabulary breadth knowledge at different frequency levels. The VLT is useful and can be done quickly, but a teacher's judgment is of importance as well.

Third, based on the VLT scores, McLean commented that the texts were too difficult for the students. If so, then the 66% comprehension in the post-test could be considered encouraging. McLean further commented that the questions with three options were easy to guess and some could be answered based on students' background knowledge without reading the passages. Guessing is a prevalent behavior in learning and testing. However, in a speed reading course, a suggested common practice is to make the questions simple and straightforward, focusing on general understanding only, so as to promote students' willingness to read faster. Certainly our future challenge is to develop better questions to decrease the degree of guessing. I also agree that the passage, *Christmas in New Zealand*, contains general knowledge; however, greater effort was definitely required to read other passages such as *Katherine Mansfield, Kiwi, Sir Edmund Hillary*, and *Tuatara*.

Finally, apart from the points raised by McLean, the fact that comprehension levels found in previous L2 speed reading research have not been satisfactory should be of concern (Chang, 2010, 2012; Chang & Millett, 2013; Cushing-Weigle & Jensen, 1996; Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2008; Taguchi, 1997; Taguchi & Gorsuch, 2002). One reason for this could be that "timing" may direct students' attention to focus more on speed. When readers accelerate their reading rates, comprehension tends to decline. If the comprehension level is not satisfactory, we may have to ask students to reduce their speed. Another reason could be that while answering the questions, students did not have the opportunity to look at the texts they had just read (see suggested principles of speed reading course, in Quinn, Nation, & Millett, 2007). That means that they had to remember what they had read in a time constrained condition. This may partly account for the less satisfactory comprehension. It is apparent that conducting a speed reading activity that can improve reading rates as well as enhance or at least not decrease comprehension has to be carefully planned. McLean has raised some good points for consideration in this under researched area, and to better our understanding of fluency more research is undoubtedly called for.

## References

- Bassett, J. (2000). *One-way ticket*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chang, C.-S. (2010). The effect of a timed reading activity on EFL learners: Speed, comprehension, and perceptions. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 22, 43–62.
- Chang, C.-S. (2012). Improving reading rate activities for EFL students: Timed reading and repeated oral reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 24, 56–83.
- Chang, C.-S., & Millett, S (2013). Improving reading rates and comprehension through timed repeated reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language Journal*, 25, 126–148.
- Gorsuch, G., & Taguchi, E. (2008). Repeated reading for developing reading fluency and reading comprehension: The case of EFL learners in Vietnam. *System*, 36, 253–278.
- Millett, S. (2005) *New Zealand speed readings for ESL learners*, Book One, ELI Occasional Publication No 19, Wellington: SLALS Victoria University of Wellington.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2005). Reading faster. *PASAA*, 36, 21–35.
- Nation, I. S. P., & Malarcher, C. (2007). *Reading for speed and fluency*. Seoul: Compass Publishing.
- Quinn, E., Nation, I. S. P., & Millett, S. (2007). Asian and Pacific speed readings for ESL learners. *ELI Occasional Publication No. 19*. Wellington: SLALS Victoria University of Wellington.
- Taguchi, E. (1997). The effects of repeated readings on the development of lower identification skills of FL readers. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 11, 97–119.
- Taguchi, E., & Gorsuch, G. J. (2002). Transfer effects of repeated EFL reading on reading new passages: A preliminary investigation. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14, 43–65.
- Taguchi, E., Takayasu-Maass, M., & Gorsuch, G. (2004). Developing reading fluency in EFL: How assisted repeated reading and extensive reading affect fluency development. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 16, 70–96.

## About the Author

Anna C-S Chang has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and is a professor of the Applied English Department at Hsing-Wu University, Taipei, Taiwan. Her main research interests focus on listening and reading development and vocabulary learning. E-mail: [annachang@livemail.tw](mailto:annachang@livemail.tw)